

**STATEMENT OF PAUL HOFFMAN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, FISH AND WILDLIFE AND PARKS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING S. 1789 AND H.R. 1616, TO AUTHORIZE THE EXCHANGE OF CERTAIN LANDS WITHIN THE MARTIN LUTHER KING, JUNIOR, NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE FOR LANDS OWNED BY THE CITY OF ATLANTA, GEORGIA, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.**

**MAY 20, 2004**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department's views on S. 1789 and H.R. 1616. These bills would authorize the exchange of lands within the Martin Luther King, Junior, National Historic Site for lands owned by the City of Atlanta, Georgia.

The Department supports both of these bills, which are identical. At a hearing on June 17, 2003, the Department testified in support of H.R. 1616, which passed the House without amendment on October 28, 2003.

Both bills would allow the National Park Service (NPS) to exchange land currently owned on Edgewood Avenue for land of equal or greater value from the City of Atlanta (City). The exchange would provide the Martin Luther King, Junior, National Historic Site (park) with emergency access to the park visitor center, and would help in the continuing revitalization of Edgewood Avenue. Although appraisals have not been completed, there would be no acquisition costs associated with this equal value exchange. Development of the newly acquired land, in order to provide paved access for emergency

vehicles, is estimated to cost \$160,000. There would be no increase in operational costs or the need to fund additional facilities.

Both bills would amend Section 2(b) of P. L. 96-428, the act that established Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, to allow the Secretary of the Interior to acquire land within the boundary of the park that is owned by the State of Georgia, or any political subdivision of the State, by exchange. Currently, P. L. 96-428 only allows the Secretary to acquire such lands by donation.

The park and nearby Preservation District, which includes Sweet Auburn, the economic and cultural center of Atlanta's African American community during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were established in 1980 to preserve, protect and interpret the places where Dr. King was born, worked, worshipped, and is buried. Located near downtown Atlanta, the park consists of 34.47 acres, of which 13.04 acres is currently in federal ownership.

Most of the park is self-guided, including the visitor center, Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, Dr. King's gravesite, Freedom Hall and Historic Fire Station No. 6. Guided tours are provided for Dr. King's Birth Home. In addition, the park preserves and maintains 22 historic properties. Most of these properties are located on the same block as the Birth Home and are restored to the 1930s period when Dr. King lived on Auburn Avenue. These historic properties are leased, as residential units, to the general public.

In 1992 when the NPS began planning for a visitor center, the preferred location was determined to be the site of the City-owned Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center. In accordance with P.L. 96-428, land could only be acquired from the City of Atlanta by donation. The City, realizing the importance of having an NPS visitor center within the park, agreed to donate the community center to the NPS.

Due in large part to the City's generosity, the visitor center has been completed. However, emergency vehicles are unable to access the visitor center from nearby streets and additional land is needed to provide this emergency vehicle access. The City owns 1.71 acres that are adjacent to the visitor center, have easy access from Jackson Street, and could be developed to provide the needed emergency access for the visitor center. The City is interested in conveying all, or a portion, of this property to the NPS through an exchange.

When the park was established, the boundary was created to ensure the preservation of Dr. King's neighborhood. Included within the boundary is Edgewood Avenue. In order to assure preservation of the area NPS has gradually acquired several properties along Edgewood Avenue, which was a deteriorating commercial area.

At the time the park was established, there were no local efforts to preserve properties along Edgewood Avenue. However, during the past 10 years several individuals and organizations, with the support of the City, have initiated restoration of the preservation district, including Edgewood Avenue. NPS ownership on Edgewood Avenue is no

longer needed solely to ensure preservation and NPS has identified land along Edgewood Avenue that would be suitable for an exchange with the City, in order to acquire the parcel adjacent to the visitor center.

That completes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or any members of the subcommittee may have.